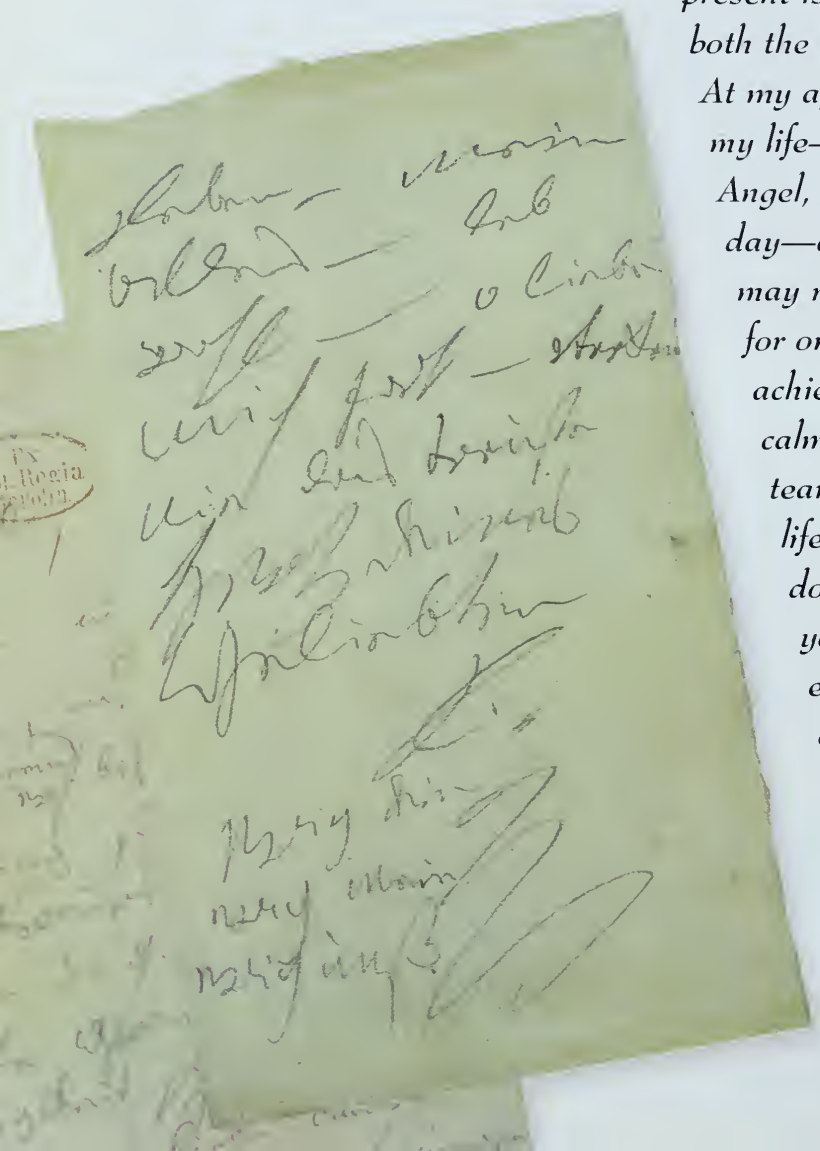
Ludwig van Beethoven to the "Immortal Beloved"

c. 1811–12
Good morning, on July 7th

Even when I am in bed my thoughts rush to you, my eternally beloved, now and then joyfully, then again sadly, waiting to know whether Fate will hear our prayer—To face life I must live altogether with you or never see you. Yes, I am resolved to be a wanderer abroad until I can fly to your arms and say that I have found my true home with you and enfolded in your arms can let my soul be wafted to the realm of blessed spirits—alas, unfortunately it must be so—You will become composed, the more so as you know that I am faithful to you; no other woman can ever possess my heart—never—never—Oh God, why must one be separated from her who is so dear. Yet my life in V[ienna] at present is a miserable life—Your love has made me both the happiest and the unhappiest of mortals—At my age I now need stability and regularity in my life—can this coexist with our relationship?—Angel, I have just heard that the post goes every day—and therefore I must close, so that you may receive the letter immediately—Be calm; for only by calmly considering our lives can we achieve our purpose to live together—Be calm—love me—Today—yesterday—what tearful longing for you—for you—you—my life—my all—all good wishes to you—Oh, do continue to love me—never misjudge your lover's most faithful heart.

ever yours
ever mine
ever ours.



Above *Ludwig van Beethoven, painted in oils by Joseph Willibrord Mähler in 1815.*

Ludwig van Beethoven never married. Any thoughts he had of marrying (and there were at least three women he is known to have felt strongly for) came to nothing. After his death in 1827, a letter, written in three sections, was found in a drawer. It was addressed to the "Immortal Beloved," but appears never to have been sent. The third part of the letter is printed opposite. It was dated July 7, but no year was given. Beethoven scholars generally think that it was probably written in either 1811 or 1812. No one knows who the "Immortal Beloved" was, but it seems fitting that a brooding musical genius should have left behind passionate words to a mysterious muse.

Beethoven was born in 1770 in Bonn, Germany, into a poor but musical family. By 1800, when he finished his *First Symphony*, he already had a considerable reputation as a concert pianist. But the onset of deafness in 1798 brought with it painful emotional isolation. In his *Heiligenstadt Testament*, written to his two brothers but never sent to them, he says:

> *"As the autumn leaves wither and fall, so has my own life become barren."*

Forced by increasing deafness to turn away from the concert platform where he had excelled, Beethoven became increasingly absorbed in composing, and would walk for hours at a time in the countryside around Vienna slowly thinking through themes for new works. Although he had female friends, he seemed troubled by an indecisiveness about women, perhaps even by a fear of them. By aligning the descriptions of all those he seemed to be attracted to, the ideal he sought but shied away from can be reconstructed. Such a woman would have been beautiful, younger than he was, well placed in society, cultured, and musical. Inevitably, as a composer earning a living through teaching piano and musical composition to aristocratic patrons, he came into contact with many attractive and sometimes eligible women. But he is on record as saying that he,

> *"...knew of no marriage in which one or the other did not regret the step after a time,"*

and that he was pleased that none of the few women whom he really admired during his life ever became his wife. Nonetheless, a close friend remembered that he,

> *"...loved to see women, particularly pretty, youthful faces."*

It is a poignant reminder of the difficult balance between great artistic endeavor and everyday happiness that a man so full of passionate feeling should be so guarded where love was concerned.

There is no way of knowing from Beethoven's letter what the "Immortal Beloved" looked like, but clearly he was addressing a real person, not an idealized vision. In the first part of the letter, not printed here, Beethoven used her own pencil

Above *The first edition of Beethoven's* An die ferne Geliebte *(To my distant beloved) published in 1816. That same year, Beethoven spoke to a music tutor of a "hopeless love" five years earlier. The remark has caused some experts to link the song cycle to the "Immortal Beloved."*

to write to her, he gave details of his dreadful journey, discussed the times of the post and spoke about a probable meeting with her. There was, then, a woman to whom Beethoven wrote declaring an intense passion. But who was she? And did he send her a copy of the letter, or were his words read by no one but himself until after his death? The letter is both a powerful testimony of love and an unsolved puzzle. It has intrigued the admiring devotees of Beethoven ever since it was first discovered.

There have been many theories about the identity of the "Immortal Beloved." Some experts favor Countess Josephine Deym, whom Beethoven fell in love with after she was widowed in 1804 at the age of 25. Between 1804 and 1807 he wrote her numerous love letters, 14 of which have survived. However, some of the evidence in the three-part letter points away from Josephine. It was intended for a woman Beethoven knew well and loved after they had known each other for some time, rather than on impulse. He expressed a need for stability in his life, and though he clearly wanted to live with her, faced an obstacle. At this point all becomes speculative. It seems likely that the "Immortal Beloved" was married,

Above *Antonie Brentano, the most likely of three women who may have been Beethoven's "Immortal Beloved." She was a married woman and a close friend.* **Below left** *Josephine Deym (née von Brunsvik) was a former love and a long-standing friend.* **Below right** *Dorothea Ertmann was a talented pianist, to whom Beethoven gave lessons.*

Below *Bad Teplitz, the spa town outside Vienna where Beethoven went for a cure in the summers of 1811 and 1812, and where he wrote two parts of the three-part letter to the "Immortal Beloved."*

and that she lived in Vienna, as Beethoven did. She was visiting a town with the initial K, probably Karlsbad. The police register at Karlsbad records four women visitors in late June and early July 1812. The 55-year-old Elizabeth von der Recke came with her lover, Christopher Tiedge. Baroness Dorothea Ertmann arrived on June 25 to seek a cure, and she fits the description: charming, young, and a fine pianist. Beethoven began giving her lessons in 1803, and she became one of the greatest interpreters of his sonatas. She lived near him in Vienna until 1824. Princess Moritz Liechtenstein, reputed to be "Vienna's most beautiful woman," was at Karlsbad with her husband during this period, as was the most likely candidate, Antonie von Brentano.

Antonie Birkenstock was born in Vienna in 1780, and married Franz Brentano, a merchant from Frankfurt, in 1798. The couple lived in Vienna with their six children from 1809 to 1812, where they became close friends with Beethoven. The composer joined them on holiday in Karlsbad in 1812, and may have taken the opportunity to declare his love to Antonie in writing. Soon after their return to Vienna, the Brentanos moved back to Frankfurt, but they continued to correspond with Beethoven, and Franz lent him sums of money, without expecting a return. In 1823 Beethoven dedicated the *Diabelli Variations* to her. If she was his "Immortal Beloved," emotion expressed through music may have been his most eloquent declaration of passionate love.

The Lovers

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770–1827)
showed so much talent as a child musician that he turned professional at the age of 11. As a young man he was taught by Mozart and Haydn and his virtuoso performances on the piano attracted aristocratic patrons in Vienna, the musical center of Europe. Beethoven is reputed to be the first musician to make a living from private patronage, without subsidies from the church or court. His best-known works (the Symphonies numbers 2 through 8, the *Moonlight Sonata*, the *Battle Symphony*, and his only opera, *Fidelio*) were written in his thirties and forties, when he was already suffering from deafness. He told friends that his affliction hampered him least when he was playing and composing, and most when he was in company. By the time he was 50, his career was blighted by this handicap, but he went on composing despite the difficulties—the *Ninth Symphony* and several string quartets are from this period. When he died of dropsy at age 57, his last words were "Applause friends, the comedy is over."

The "Immortal Beloved"
No one has ever identified her—she remains a romantic enigma.